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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [KISL](#) [KCOR](#) [MO](#)  
SUBJECT: JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY LEADER PRAGMATIC IN  
MEETING WITH U.S. AMBASSADOR

Classified By: Ambassador Thomas T. Riley for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Moroccan Justice and Development Party (PJD) Chairman Benkirane told the Ambassador in a recent meeting that the principal reason for the United States' increasingly negative image among Moroccans is the perception that the U.S. has become increasingly pro-Israeli and less objective in regard to the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Regarding domestic issues, Benkirane considered the state of corruption in Morocco to be "catastrophic," and recommended increased religious rhetoric in public discourse and rooting out corruption at the Governor/Mayor level to combat the problem. Benkirane was dismissive of the potential political competition posed by the new palace-favored Authenticity and Modernity Party (AAM) to the PJD, describing the new party as an "error of the State" and lacking connection to the common man. The PJD appears to be brandishing a moderate political agenda, probably in part to blunt the AAM's appeal, in the run up to the 2009 municipal elections. End Summary.

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Ambassador Congratulates Benkirane  
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¶2. (C) On August 13, the Ambassador and A/PolCouns paid a courtesy call on new Director General of the Justice and Development Party (PJD) Abdelilah Benkirane. The Ambassador congratulated Benkirane on his new post and the apparent transparency in the PJD Secretary General elections. Benkirane thanked the Ambassador, underscoring the PJD's emphasis on transparency and democracy, adding: "the old ways are dead." (Comment: Benkirane was alluding to the backroom politicking that still characterizes leadership changes in most of Morocco's political parties. Recent news coverage of the internal PJD selection process has been positive and described as fair and transparent. End Comment.) PJD General Secretariat member Lahcen Daoudi and PJD Parliamentarian Abdallah Baha were also present at the meeting and actively participated in the discussions.

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U.S. Suffering from Unquestioning Support of Israel  
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¶3. (C) When asked by the Ambassador how the U.S. could improve its low approval rating in Morocco (and the rest of the Middle East), Benkirane said that majority of Moroccans love America: its liberties; ideals; and magnificent institutions (specifically mentioning the U.S. judicial system and its protections of individual rights); and they recognize that the U.S. is the most powerful country in the world. He continued, "Morocco is a unique society that is tolerant, modern, and closely tied to Europe, but what Moroccans cannot understand is how a country like the United States with such great institutions and power can lend its unquestioning support to Israel, when it is carrying out such unjust policies toward the Palestinians. Benkirane underscored that since 1993, the U.S. has become increasingly pro-Israeli and less objective in regard to the

Israeli-Palestinian issue. Benkirane also mentioned the U.S. presence in Iraq as another obvious source of unpopular sentiment. Extrapolating into the future, Benkirane asked rhetorically, "If America is the most powerful country in the world, shouldn't it be able to correct its errors in the Middle East?"

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Corruption in Morocco Described As "Catastrophic"  
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14. (C) Benkirane described the state of corruption in Morocco to be "catastrophic," acknowledging its existence at all levels of Moroccan society, including the government, law enforcement, and education system. Lamenting corruption within political parties, Benkirane said that under late King Hassan II political parties better represented the people, and their views were taken more into account (by the King), but today "their attraction is only to money." To partly address this problem, Benkirane suggested two actions. Underscoring that because corruption exists on such a wide scale in Morocco, the country first needed more references to religion in its public discourse to strengthen the moral fiber of the society. Public officials referencing religion would serve to increase compliance with existing laws, by reminding Moroccans that seditious acts can also be considered contrary to Islam. Benkirane opined that many Moroccans often rationalize illegal behavior by selectively considering some laws to be applicable to "other people" but not to them, i.e., a cognitive dissonance perhaps stemming from resentment of French laws imposed on Moroccan society during the colonial era, he explained.

15. (C) Second, Benkirane underscored that the example set by leaders was critical in creating a climate of intolerance for corruption. He said that while corruption needs to be confronted at all levels of society, he considered the most important level to be with Walis and Pashas, i.e., governor and mayor equivalents respectively. Abdallah Baha also added, with Benkirane's apparent agreement, that reform of the ministries through greater transparency and democracy was also important. Baha underscored that without increased transparency and democracy, even the best counter corruption/development efforts will eventually regress. Although Baha also mentioned the Ministries of Interior and Finance, he considered reform of the Justice Ministry to be the most important of the three in this regard.

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Local Approach Emphasized for Poverty Alleviation  
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16. (C) Benkirane considered poverty alleviation to be another critical area of attention for the Moroccan Government, stressing the need for engagement at the communal level, i.e., town or neighborhood council equivalent. Alluding to his earlier comments about corruption, Benkirane emphasized that communes in Morocco govern themselves the most efficiently and honestly. He criticized the government's current lack of engagement at this level, adding, "The more layers of government you have, the more diluted the impact; give the communities the means, and you will see results." Benkirane also underscored the need for a long term commitment to economic development and that only gradual and sincere efforts at the local level are sustainable. Baha reinforced his party leader's points, describing centralized development efforts as "a handicap to economic development in Morocco." While acknowledging that a centralized role of the state was appropriate and important in certain areas, such as national defense and security, in the area of economic development, the government should decentralize its economic development efforts "to the maximum."

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Dismissive of El-Himma's New Party  
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¶7. (C) When asked about the "Authenticity and Modernity Party" (AAM), a new political party recently born out of a political association dominated by palace intimate Fouad Ali El-Himma called "Movement of All Democrats," Benkirane was dismissive. He considered the introduction of the AAM to be a "mistake of the State." Benkirane opined that after 2007 elections, which had a record low 37 percent turn out of registered voters, the King decided to introduce a "palace party" to fill the leadership void that all other parties appeared to be unwilling to fill. Despite the possible good intentions behind the creation of the AAM, Benkirane opined that it lacked grassroots support and would be unable to gain real currency with the "common man." He was, therefore, dismissive of its potential as a threat to the PJD as a political competitor.

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Inquires about the Algerian Border and Georgia  
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¶8. (C) Benkirane asked for the Ambassador's assessment of the prospects of Algeria agreeing to open its common border with Morocco. In a half appeal to the Ambassador, Benkirane said that one of the ways that the U.S. could improve its image in Morocco would be to use its influence to put pressure on the Algerians to open the border with Morocco. Benkirane praised the U.S. support for Morocco on the question of the Western Sahara. Most assuredly cognizant of its parallels to Morocco's claims over Western Sahara, Benkirane also asked the Ambassador why the U.S. had initially reacted slowly in condemning Russia's military actions in South Ossetia, to which the Ambassador demurred, calling the situation complex and fluid.

¶9. (C) Comment: The atmospherics of the meeting were positive. Benkirane, who was gregarious, poised, and articulate, seemed genuinely pleased to see the Ambassador, who Benkirane was meeting for the first time. The meeting was followed by several positive press reports (including one in the Arabic language El-Massae and another in the French language Aujourd'hui Maroc) which described the Embassy-PJD interaction as "pragmatic," elaborating on the willingness of both parties to discuss issues of mutual interest despite disagreements over U.S. foreign policy. The presence of photographers at the meeting and the apparent willingness of PJD officials, particularly Daoudi, to engage the press on the meeting, demonstrate that the PJD considered the meeting

to be a positive event, to the probable consternation of some hard-line PJD members. The presence of Daoudi, a senior advisor to outgoing party chairman Othmani, and Abdallah Baha, who ran against Benkirane for his new post, demonstrates an impressive party unity and probable political continuity into the future. Benkirane's emphasis on local approaches to address issues like corruption and poverty appear to be consistent with the PJD's local empowerment programs and in sync with Morocco's history of regional autonomy.

¶10. (C) Comment Continued: Although Benkirane mentioned that the AAM had been created to serve as an example/leader for other parties, he deftly avoided stating the more widely held (and perhaps less complementary) belief that the palace created AAM primarily as a counter weight to the rising appeal of Islamist political sentiment in Morocco. Creating a "palace party" to counter a perceived threat to palace's political dominance is an old "Makhzenian" (palace) political tactic. However, the PJD appears to be countering by brandishing a moderate political agenda, meeting with other party and foreign officials, and repeating the PJD mantra that it is not a religious party but "a political party with a religious reference." In Benkirane's early public statements as party head, he said that the party wanted to focus on "everyday concerns rather than a religious agenda," emphasizing economic and anti-corruption issues. By denying the AAM of its dialectic opposite, i.e., a threatening "Islamist" party, the PJD likely calculates that it will be able to take the wind out of the AAM's sails politically

speaking, in the run up to the 2009 municipal elections. End  
Comment.

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